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AUTHOR Glover, Polly S.
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ABSTRACT

This essay considers the many benefits of journal writing. It explains how one person learned, during a 26-mile commute, to talk into a tape recorder slowly, leaving sizable pauses between phrases to facilitate transcription later on; how journal writing is a way to catch moments in the day, to describe a scene or to make connections that one might otherwise forget; and describes a number of approaches or techniques to use when writing in a journal, such as word sculptures, which are a combination of doodling, image making, and free-writing. The essay contains several excerpts from personal journals, romantic reminiscences, thoughts about relationships with students, and attempts to understand one's own feelings through experimentation with imagery. (TB)

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Polly S. Glover

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Gaining Strength from Experience: The Personal Journal

How to build a writing life:

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC):

1. Decide you want it more than sleep.
2. Develop an openness to the curve of thought, the jab of emotion.
3. Select the pen you like best and stare long minutes at that dark spot on the floor, watch what comes into your peripheral vision. Wait until your emotions say, "Now."
4. Then form a channel from your brain, down your neck into your arm, through your fingers to that pen, and watch words come.
5. Wonder at the effortlessness.
6. Marvel at the surprises.
7. Be prepared to cry.
8. And when the words tell you they are ready, let them go.

Thus, through my personal journal, searching my experience, exercising feelings, discovering more about myself, I grow stronger. Three primary activities help me find what I need to be writing: tape recording, word sculptures, and clustering.

On my 26-mile commute I have time to pick up my little tape recorder and talk as thoughts form. For easier transcribing, I've learned to slow down my rapid speech, say a phrase, wait a moment, then continue. I used this method most when a friend and I agreed to exchange journals each week. I catch moments from the day, describe a scene, or make connections which I might otherwise forget. It allows me to capture thoughts that surprise me both with the amount and the nature of the observations.

I learned about word sculptures this summer when I was working through Gabrielle Rico's book, Pain and Possibility. To make a word sculpture, set pencil to paper after a brief pause, and let it go wherever your hand takes it; finally, add doodles and words to complete the image; the entire process takes a couple of minutes. Once near the beginning of this summer's writing and reflection, when I was still feeling very closed, my word sculpture began with interwoven circles which then moved into a series of long, sweeping lines curving right and then left, finally stopping in an open position; the words which came were "So the way does break

free--open up--continue" --just the encouragement I needed. Another began at the center and circled out, making a series of infinity symbols; the last infinity symbol swept upward, back toward the point where I'd begun. Looking at it, I realized that my reflections were leading me back to a point in childhood that I needed to examine.

The most important way into my thoughts is clustering, learned from Rico's Writing the Natural Way. Because I take in the world mainly through intuition, I respond in non-linear ways. To put a word in the center of the page and then to group ideas around that word, until bunches hang all about the paper feels right. Usually my little voice does begin to tell me something I need to hear. Then I freewrite as fast as possible, often with a pen, sometimes at the computer.

That is how I write. Why I write takes more explanation. I write to store memories, to see more clearly, and to affirm my life. Here's one taped entry I'm glad to have:

The pasture and wheat fields are deep, shining green. Grey-white clouds lie massed on the horizon. Cows graze in the fields; birds fly all around them. Above it all stand a new sleek water tower on the hill behind the school and the cellular phone tower blinking its white light off and on. Water running underneath layers of soil flows into the water tower; messages floating in the air around me funnel through the phone tower into receivers. The words are all around me, but I can't hear them. Messages, too, are everywhere--in expressions, in eyes, even in words and I don't hear them because I'm not ready, because I don't think somebody should feel that way, because I just have other things to do.

If I can describe something beautiful, it will be there to enjoy again. It's pleasant to read back through the journal and feel surprised at what I noticed, such as this entry:

Last night after the storm I saw a full rainbow arching across the east, so vivid and clear that the sky inside the arch was tinted yellow, the green also intense, and within it to the north

an array of lightning branched off in all directions. Then where the bow set its northern foot, above flat grey-blue layers, sunset pinks touched clouds banked in what might have been mountains.

I can savor good times, such as this conversation with a former student:

Katie stopped by to tell me that last semester was awful; this semester, better. "You have something to do with that SYNERGY study skills course? ... Tell me about the lit surveys. ... Tell me what to put in a book review...." I remember when she was certain that she couldn't do a research paper and now she's talking about going to El Paso to observe and perhaps return to teach.

My journal helps me see more clearly. I am the words I can find. And when I see, I understand. Here is one insight:

Deference. The silly smile, pasted on, willing pleasantness, not acknowledging conflict. The anxiety underneath. How will they take it? When I admit my fears, I mirror others' fears. When we're honest, others can be. With deference, I get some crumbs, but see the cake I can't have. I wait for someone else to hand it to me. It is not possible to feel complete and to defer. Deference puts off. I am so tied to others that I can't even see my desires separately. There is a power we give others when we consider them first and submit. What do I want? If I treat myself well, I can be worth more to someone else, too. I do want to have worth and mean something, but first to mean something to myself. If I can do that, there's a well for others to draw from. If I don't nourish myself, there's only a pitcher for others, not enough for them, nothing for me.

Writing, I begin to work through problems I can't talk about. This piece recalls for me a very real place in West Virginia, but it also becomes metaphor:

I have walked in the dark, feeling my way, bumping into large, looming objects,

stumbling over tree roots, feeling ahead to ward off the sharp stems, getting bruised. The darkness lies palpable on our skins. Even though someone walks beside us, the dark must pass through the pupils of our eyes, enlarged to take in every bit of light. Sometimes the moonlight makes the way clearer, sometimes a flashlight or a noise, a radio in the distance. People come out of the darkness for a few minutes, then retreating, go on their way.

My journal helps me understand my feelings. An analogy can clarify. When my body felt constricted in dealing with some recent losses, this entry helped me find a reason to continue painful exploring:

No connections are possible without a knot. The knot holds thread in needle, slender, pointed instrument, piercing fabric, connecting the parts. I gather in pieces from memory, holding them together with needle-words, piercing in discovery, thread-chains of words for moments saved, pulling them through--all attached with knots of rediscovered, newly disclosed feeling.

As I write, I acknowledge where I am.

Four women are sitting in wheelchairs near the door at the nursing home. One sits in her wheelchair in the hall, with a tray over her lap, talking quite lucidly, "Will you help me into the shower?" Another sits upright, watching me, not smiling, angry. I've seen her cursing the nurses to get her back into bed. I smile and say hello. I walk briskly past the commons area; Miss Betty is sitting on the sofa, small, contained, watching tv, while all the others lie in wooden recliner chairs, vacant, staring. Mother sits near the edge of the crowd, looking away, waiting until her room is cleaned. She's lost her long shoe horn. We go back to her room, passing Miss Virginia, whom she always calls Miss Janie; she's talking on the phone. I wave, she waves back. Miss Edie is next, "Hello, dear. How are you, Polly? You're looking good, dear." As we go into Mother's room, Miss Annie rolls out, "How are you, Miss Annie?" I say.

"Just tolerable," she says, "You know 'just tolerable'?" Mother tells me all the places she's looked for the shoe horn. I check the bedside table, then go to the closet, and there it stands. I take it out; Mother sees it. "And you found it in the bathroom?" "No, in your closet." Also in the closet is her Kleenex box, with a tan washcloth and several paper napkins tucked into the top. She wonders when we'll be going to the dentist. "I'm living one day at a time now, Mother, and it's not tomorrow," I say. "Just call the people up front and I'll be ready," she says. Everyday I think of something I would like to talk with her about, something she'd know. Usually when I ask, she says, "Polly, I've forgotten those things." Soon she signals that it's time for me to go. "I think I'm doing just fine. As far as I know, I'm doing fine. Now when is it we go to the dentist? Tell them at the desk." I head toward the front door but can't get through because women in wheelchairs block the exit. One rolls up to the door and gives it a tentative push. She mutters something. I walk to the side around her and push the bar to open the door; as I go through, the alarm sounds and a nurse rushes to cut it off. I wish I knew the things to talk with Mother about that would help her think about her memories. I feel as locked up inside my head, as unable to communicate on a meaningful level, as that woman, trying the door, pushing lightly, wanting out.

Writing, I discover where I must go.

Eliot wrote

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. (V. 239-242)

Here, far inland cattle egrets float over waves of grain and choppy soybeans, the birds' white undersides catching the sunlight. They seem out of place. There, on the shore at St. Simon's, we had arrived after dark, hearing the rush of waves, muffled, deceptively gentle, sinister,

powerful. The children late in the evening are walking with their father out to the ocean. I'm calling, "Come back," for we have not seen the beach in sunlight and I fear the dark edge, with only the roar and retreat that doesn't stop, louder at night, concentrated sound. My mind is filled with lines half remembered, images half noticed, feelings half lived. Gulls circle and cry even in the darkness. Polk and the children return.

Water seeps into small pools in the sand, where footsteps left indentions. Gulls hang above the waves, crying in the dark. An ocean rushes in to shore; we live in puddles left by footsteps and wish we could think great thoughts, say great things.

Yeats wrote for his daughter, "In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned." But did he want his child to accept her place in a drawing room? For some people life seems so simple, filled with certainties and stabilities and civilities. For others it brims with complexity, doubt, and anger. It is hard to choose discomfort, far easier to pretend, easier still to live unaware of pretending.

Can we spend 23 hours each day serving the known, the expected--all for one hour of watching the gulls float on the warm spring air in the sunlit place in our minds? Can we endure that wait in the dark on a shore we've never seen before, with courtesy learned in a room?

It's hard to accept every thought that comes. I want to censor. These words might not be right. I might offend. Worse, I might be misunderstood. I'm taking a long time to write this. When will I feel finished? When we come again to the shore and I walk to the edge in the dark.

Writing, I accept what is.

Mother says, "Now what are you to me? You're my ...?"

"Your daughter, Mother," I say. "It doesn't seem like it, does it, because I got so big and so old?" She goes on to tell me about how Daddy made a chair and ottoman "for Brooke

(that's my daughter but she means me) and you would sit in it and put your feet up just like he'd do in his big chair."

"And he made a library table, too." I said.

"Yes, he'd go up there to the corner--"

"To Mr. Lemon Cain's?" I asked.

"Yes, he had a special saw." I remember Mr. Lemon's as almost a lean-to, a shack on the corner of the road. I didn't know that was where my dad made my chair. We talk about riding the train to Detroit and about how she didn't work when we were up there--"We lived in someone's back room;" I've never heard that before. We talk about her going to work when we came back and he stayed home. "The dust at the gravel pit really hurt him." That is new to me. Then we talk about how, two years after he died, she'd walked all over town looking for a cheap lot to buy, and she found one and Uncle Joe and a young man built the house. "I told them to either hang the door or prop it up that weekend; we were coming in and we did." I remember how we later tore down the "magical back porch" where I had all my imaginary friends. "Do you remember the porch with the cabinets and the windows above them?"

Yes, she nods. And then she says, "It really wasn't a bad life."

Writing what I know and think, I complete experience and affirm the life I have shared with others.

In the photograph Josh and his grandmother are at Eva, skipping rocks into the lake. The water circles out from the place where the flat rock bounced last. I remember Mrs. Melton telling me that before TVA flooded this area, archaeologists found rocks that were new when Moses was living. Water ripples outward, radiating, and the rock settles downward, back to its prehistoric bed.

... And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.

I want to know the place where I am, to feel it all, to be a part of it, making sense. Turning back through the pages of my journal, I read about that skipping rock and the moment, on memory's riverbed, floats again to the surface. I am back in that autumn afternoon, aiming the flat stones far out into Kentucky Lake; water ripples out once more, and I remember the place I loved as a child, that I have shared with my children, now grown, and that my mother and I always visited when she was still at home. Now it's another year and I slice into an Arkansas apple, sum of the summer sunshine, of the air, the water, the hillside. In the center lies a star, moist rings of meaty red-skinned fruit. I yearn to grow, spiraling out to a new place and in to an inner source, the core. What matters is all--and nothing that swells to become everything, and so I am connected with skipping rocks at Eva and summer in Arkansas with crimson apples loading down the tree. One tree bears a whole basketful and more, too many for the workers and so they call in the world. Come and pick our apples. We supply the baskets. You supply the reaching, the choosing, the gathering in.... Smelling the pungent, dry apples; soaking in the sunshine; walking gingerly among the fallen apples, I have been apple-picking among the moments of my life. I have done the choosing and I will do the cutting, to find at its core, a star.